Interview with Helen C. (Sue) Low

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

SUE (HELEN) C. LOW

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Initial interview date: May 14, 1987

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Thursday, May 14, 1987. I'm interviewing Susan Low, Mrs. Stephen Low. An earlier interview was done by Hope Meyers and dealt primarily with Sue's involvement in the Foreign Service Associates proposal.

Note: This tape, and any subsequent tape I may do, will deal with the early days in the newly independent African countries in the late 1950s and 1960s. (In fact, it continues through 1981 with posts in Brasilia (1968-71), Lusaka (1976-79) and Lagos (1979-81) as well as the early posts in Kampala (1957-59) and Dakar (1960-63.)

LOW: We came into the Foreign Service at the beginning of 1956. This was the period when the State Department had concluded that independence would soon be coming to the countries of Africa and decided to set up consulates in various parts of the continent to facilitate communication with Washington. Uganda was among the first four countries in which a consulate was established. Kampala was to be a two-man post plus an American secretary. As there were no “Africa hands” at that point, Peter Hooper, who had been assigned as Consul, asked his car pool colleagues if anyone had suggestions for a junior officer. So Steve, who was working on the Philippines and Malaysia, came home one night with the comment, as we dried the dinner dishes, “Someone at work today asked whether we'd be interested in going to Kampala.” The next day at the Library of Congress, where

I was doing some research, I found a total of two publications on Uganda. One, a little guide book put out by their office of information, made the country sound like a primordial paradise — as it did prove to be in many ways. So when Peter posed the question, we said emphatically yes, we would like to go with him!

We arrived in Kampala a few weeks after Peter since our first child was born just at that point in May 1957. The little plane flew up from Nairobi in short hops, landing on grassy strips along the route. When the pilot cut off the motor, someone would run out from a tiny shack with a ladder and a No Smoking sign, plop these into place beside the plane and rush back to get a square four-gallon can of petrol. He — sometimes she — would climb the ladder and empty the debbie tins, one after another, until the tank was full. Then the ladder and sign would be whisked away and we would take off again. At one stop the process moved so fast that the pilot informed me, “Well, lady, when you finish diapering the baby, we're ready to go.” That was the way we arrived — with the Great Seal of the United States under one arm and our firstborn child in the other. I remember wondering to myself as I took the flag out of its box, “Should I press out the wrinkles or do I let the wind do it?” It often seemed that there was no one to ask about anything and we simply settled into the community as best we could, feeling very much like pioneers.

Uganda was very different from Kenya with its white settler community. During the first World War a decision had been made that no non-African would be permitted to own land in Uganda except for a house plot. This meant that there were no white settlers. Besides the Africans, the only significant group were the Indians who had been brought in to build the railway from Mombasa on the seacoast at the turn of the century. The technicians who came out from Britain to maintain the hydroelectric dam at Jinja where the Nile leaves Lake Victoria, for example, came on one-year contracts, brought only suitcases, lived in Public Works Department housing, worked for nine months, and went away. Except for the officials in the British Colonial Service, many of whom had come from India after independence there, few outsiders were to be found. Makerere College, which served all of East Africa as an external college of the University of London, proved to be the key to

understanding what was going on around us. With its international faculty, African as well as European, and its Institute of Social Research, it made a tremendous difference in our ability to orient ourselves.

Our two years in Uganda were a constant learning session. I remember vividly a weekend in Eastern Province where we went to give a seminar on the United States. On a big map we pointed out Oklahoma where I was born, Ohio where Steve comes from, and Washington where we had been living, and tried to give some idea of distances. The participants, who were students in the adult education program, kept asking puzzling questions that we didn't know how to answer: “What is the language of the governing authority?” “What language do you speak among yourselves?” Suddenly we realized that they thought of the U.S. as a group of forty-eight tribes administered by an English-speaking colonial power in Washington! And they were preoccupied with the Red Indians, as they termed them, wanting to know where they fitted into the picture.

Q: These were tribal people obviously?

LOW: They were the ordinary people of the town and countryside.

It is true that people thought of themselves as members of a particular tribe. That was their primary identity — and hence the first thing you needed to know about someone, whatever his education or position, before you could begin to get him in focus. In Uganda missionaries had translated the Bible into the more than forty languages. With primary education in their native tongue, many people were literate and followed local events in the vernacular press, a situation in contrast with some other parts of the continent, such as French West Africa where only a small proportion were literate — and then only in French. In Uganda at the time we were there, one would often hear people learning English by listening to the radio, holding their little transistor radios to their ears as they walked or cycled along the road.

Q: I mentioned "tribal" because in Sierra Leone the highly educated people who had been to school in England were really the descendants of freed slaves. They were not tribal. They were called Creoles. They were the educated people and if a tribal people from a country would react to the United States as...

LOW: But you see, as I was trying to describe Uganda, it is not at all like Sierra Leone. It was not like West Africa. It's in the interior of the continent where there were no outsiders except for a few slave traders until a hundred years ago. The coast had had centuries of contact.

Q: So these people had been educated in their own languages in Uganda and not in England?

LOW: For primary education. During our tour there was only one English-speaking high school for girls. But a higher proportion of the population was literate than in French West Africa. A few people had studied abroad, in Britain or at Fort Hare in South Africa (which had been a fine institution and a focal point for education of blacks on the continent earlier). Most of them were teaching or doing research at Makerere but the number was small.

Q: Well, of course, that was true in West Africa, too.

LOW: Right, but I think it was even more pronounced. It was an entirely different situation from West Africa as we experienced it at our next post in Dakar.

Q: And the military people had not been to Sandhurst?

LOW: There were very few. This was a protectorate. It had been that way since late in the nineteenth century when the British and French were jostling for land in that central stretch of Africa.

Q: What was Milton Obote?

LOW: I don't know. He didn't surface until later.

Q: So you left before independence?

LOW: Yes, we did. During our time three countries had consulates in Kampala. There was a Sudanese Consul General, an Indian Assistant High Commissioner, and a Portuguese Honorary Consul. The only community was African. We knew the university people, some school teachers, some church people, some politicians, journalists, labor leaders.

Uganda was a fabulous country to explore. We had the exhilarating feeling of being explorers, of going places where Americans hadn't been before. I remember the excitement when Steve came home one night with the news that he had found another American. She was an anthropologist working with her husband in the semi-arid northeast corner of the country among the Karamojong, a Nilotic cattle-keeping people. Later we visited them there, chatting — through Rada — with the women in their bramble-enclosed stockades, sitting on stiff cow hides on the hard earth floor, trying to swallow a sip of the generously offered millet beer — the means of stretching their dwindling grain supply until the next harvest. The chief wife of the village headman, whose large horde of copper wire necklaces — tossed unceremoniously over a stake of the enclosure — proclaimed her position, showed us how to dance properly and with gusto. Just before sunset we visited the cattle camp where the spears and shields propped against the stones testified to the tensions with a neighboring tribe which had brought death to one member the week before. At nightfall, when the flies departed, the cow which had been chosen to provide that night's supper was shot in the jugular vein with a blocked arrow, the rope around her neck loosened when enough blood had been collected in the wooden bowl; mixed with milk, this provided the nourishment which accounted for glistening teeth and glossy jet-black skin — for all the menfolk.

Q: Did you travel, as we did, with all of your food, all of your water, spare tires, all your gasoline, your servants, your kerosene lanterns? I mean we were self-sufficient when we set out. Did you have to do that, too?

LOW: Not quite to the extent that you describe it. There were occasions when we ran out of petrol and had to coast down through the twilight among the papyrus swamps. Or found ourselves grateful when offered a roasted ear of what under other circumstances would have seemed very tough corn. But what I remember most are the highlight events — a trip north along a jeep track to the Nile where it spreads out below Murchison Falls, the elephant grass trembling as two giants tussled and the victor then turned to flap his ears warningly at us. Or, on another occasion, watching above the elephant grass a reassuring line of approaching bundles, just as we had concluded that we were irretrievably lost.

But the world immediately surrounding us was equally colorful and exotic. When you ask someone about his society and culture and he starts talking about clans and totems and their symbolic significance, one soon gets lost since it is so foreign to our experience. There was a remarkable American woman living in Kampala, setting up YWCA programs in the Kiganda villages. Not having anyone with whom I could leave our son for any length of time, I could go with her Muganda assistant very seldom but the contact with village life gained there formed an important part of my impression of the country. Over the years I have found that getting a feel for the life of the women, rural and urban, traditional and modern, professional and housewife, is the surest way to get below the surface.

After leaving Uganda and a brief interval in Washington where Steve trained to serve as a labor attach#, we went to Dakar just as it was adjusting to being the capital of a small country rather than of a vast region. That tour provided fascinating contrasts between East Africa and West, English and French, colonial and independent.

Q: So Senegal was independent when you got there?

LOW: It became independent just before we arrived and celebrated the event a few months later when the weather was better. Our three years there were mostly a blur for me since we brought two small children with us and a third was born there. As in Uganda I didn't have adequate help so most of my energy went into just holding things together. We did do a fair amount of entertaining however.

Q: Part of that time we were in Sierra Leone when you were in Senegal — '62 and '63.

LOW: We were in Dakar from late '60 to late '63. That was the first place where I had any contact with the way an American diplomatic community functioned. (I had been the only spouse in Kampala and in the social dimension we had improvised in that atypical situation.)

Q: But really, what a wonderful way to start a career with all that responsibility and...

LOW: It was a fun way to start.

Q: ...and to make your own decisions in many, many instances.

LOW: The social situation was so different from any existing model that guidelines tailored for other places would hardly have applied.

Q: Do you remember Susan McClintock, the first career counselor in FLO with Janet Lloyd?

LOW: I've met Susan. I don't know her well.

Q: She and her husband, David, went to Yemen with a baby, and the mission was terribly understaffed, and so Susan just put the baby in a basket, and brought the baby into the Embassy, and worked side by side with David. She said really, in retrospect, those were the happiest Foreign Service days she had.

LOW: One can look back on each tour and find highlights. But of all our posts, Brasilia was the one we enjoyed most.

In Senegal the French were pulling out just as we arrived. The U.S. had had a consulate general there long before independence when Dakar was capital of all French West Africa. It was a very cosmopolitan place with some highly educated and widely traveled Senegalese. As a post Dakar was dramatically different from Kampala; it was a fully functioning metropolis with a well established diplomatic corps.

Q: Well yes, it was a great treat. We used to fight in Freetown for an opportunity to come up to Dakar because it was much more sophisticated than the life we were leading.

LOW: One of the projects I found most interesting, to the extent that I had time to get involved in things, was a community center not far from us, run by the French Council of Churches. The center did not proselytize in that entirely Muslim country but was trying to serve a social role. One of their programs was designed to help raise the horizons of wives of people who had moved abruptly from being minor functionaries to assuming roles of some importance. Sometimes I went with the center staff to a nearby fishing village where the women spoke only Wolof. The challenge for all of us, the French women as well as me, was trying to communicate, to transmit basic ideas about hygiene and diet and to give them some new household skills. I remember vividly the frustration of trying to demonstrate without words how a foot-treadle sewing machine functions. And the time when the day's program was to bake a pound cake, each participant taking a turn at beating in the eggs with great gusto. When the oven was lit, a horde of cockroaches ran out in all directions, but later the fragrant cake that emerged just as the head of the household returned home won a reprieve for the oven which he had threatened to discard.

There was nothing particularly distinctive about the entertaining we did in Dakar except that, as our house was small, we tried to plan outside events. During the rainy season we

sometimes had to resort to all sorts of improvisations, like roasting the mechoui (lamb and couscous) under an overhanging roof — and eating it there, too.

Senegal was a three year tour. In those days we did not get back to the U.S. during that entire period. As there were no satellites to make intercontinental phone communication possible, we felt quite cut off from home even though the pouch did bring letters.

Q: I felt more isolated in Sierra Leone than in any other post.

LOW: This had been true for us in Uganda as well. As I look back at those two posts, our life was radically different from more recent Foreign Service patterns. It was very hard — but we accepted that as the way Foreign Service life was.

Q: I arrived home 35 pounds underweight.

LOW: Our youngest son and I returned home with amoebic dysentery. What I found most difficult was the lack of adequate medical care. With three little boys, one of them born there, it was a constant concern.

Of course, we all took anti-malarials regularly but the children often had high fever and there was no one to turn to for help or diagnosis. The only time I felt a little more relaxed about a fever was when it turned out to be chicken pox — at least I knew what the problem was!

Q: My children went away to school the next two years. They were there for 14 months. Then the school said they couldn't take them anymore so all of us at the Embassy had to send these small children away to school because that was the way the British did. I can remember going to Abidjan and being so hurt that here were my colleagues in the Cote d'Ivoire with their children with them because there was an adequate French school. And then there mine were away in Switzerland.

LOW: The American children at our mission in Dakar found it very difficult to latch onto the French system. I remember one nine-year-old boy who came home from school regularly in the late afternoon, his satchel loaded with books. He studied from then until bedtime to avoid the need to repeat the year's curriculum. By contrast, our eldest son, who was three and a half when we arrived, went first to a Jardin d'Infants and then to first grade in the public school in our neighborhood. There were four entering classes, three for Wolof-speaking children who covered the year's work in two years and then would no longer use Wolof. Half of the fourth group were French children; half were African children who spoke French at home — and this one little American boy.

The first day of class these five-year-olds took their pens, dipped them in ink, and wrote “ecureuil” in cursive style!

It was not an easy time for our schoolboy. That made it a post with its own special hardships and difficulties. And I began to appreciate how hard it can be for our Foreign Service children to move around so much.

Q: But no. I think that is a very important subject because I'm astonished that my children turned out as well as they did considering the life that they led. Really. How many languages and how many continents! I have them written down somewhere — three languages, 13 schools, three or four continents. I forget exactly.

LOW: Is there anything else that you want to focus on in Senegal? Or shall we go on to...

Q: I was trying to think back, how did I fill my days in Sierra Leone? I used to haunt the little shops that the traders have. I noticed that you have a lovely Bambara carving from Mali. I started collecting and I collected tie-dyed cloth.

LOW: My problem has always been how to find enough hours to do the absolutely essential things. Wherever we are or whatever we're doing, it seems to be that way. When I came home from the clinic with our third new-born son, I didn't have anyone at all to help

with the children. The person I thought I had lined up didn't work out. Fortunately I did have someone helping in the kitchen but I was taking care of these three small children myself — from washing diapers on. And, as you know, houses and systems in Africa aren't set up for doing things oneself.

Q: Was help that difficult in Senegal?

LOW: At that time it was quite difficult.

Q: We did have servants who had worked for the British.

LOW: Our cook was good and that worked well.

Back to the mission itself. At the time we arrived, we had a career Ambassador, Henry Villard. Shortly afterward, Vice President Johnson came for the Senegalese independence ceremonies. That was a traumatic experience, handling his intricate program with the mission's limited facilities. Villard was succeeded by a political appointee, Phil Kaiser, a very capable person who has subsequently served with distinction in many posts. His wife Hannah was marvelous but was learning the ropes rather than serving as a role model for how the social side of diplomatic life should be run. Fortunately we did have some senior wives who were very helpful and very conscientious about the American diplomatic community.

Q: Which cone was your husband in? Political?

LOW: When we first came to Senegal, after ten months of training in Washington, he was assigned as labor attach# for what had been French West Africa, except for Guinea and Mali. Later he became political officer for Senegal, Mauritania, the Gambia, and Portuguese Guinea — an interesting quartet. He traveled a great deal but we went with him only on rare holidays. It wasn't an easy place to explore with small children.

Q: I have to think back to that time. It just seems to me that we either were doing something very exciting, terribly fun, sleeping on the sands of the Niger River in Timbuktu under a full moon; or else I was just beside myself with boredom after my children went away to school. Because you can only go so often, as we did, to hand out USAID cornmeal in the morning to the women, and then go down to the local market and buy it back in the afternoon because that was the only way that we could get cornmeal. We worked very hard for a Red Cross benefit once. Oh my, you know, the hot sun all day and great effort, and as a result two people, who were in charge of the Red Cross in Sierra Leone, took the money and went off to Geneva. We were just livid, and our interest in that kind of charity really just waned terribly when we saw the abuses that were taking place. I'm like you. I have a bit of a fog there and I think I dwindled further and further away from good deeds.

I also understand at that time that our superior officers' wives were under a great deal of pressure from Katie Louchheim to get people out to do good deeds. Our first DCM's wife left post on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She was really a very dedicated, very sincere woman, and she took things to heart. She had us going out to the YWCA, the Red Cross, the this, the that. I mean everything, weighing babies...

LOW: I didn't have any feeling of pressure to do anything. This was in part a reflection of the DCM's wife who was aware that I had my hands full. But I did the various things I spoke to you about at the Centre de Bop. And sometimes we audited courses at the university. Those were the major ways in which I, as a more junior wife, moved out into the community beyond the contacts that my husband had.

Q: I feel pressured because I was not... Guido was just a junior officer. But the DCM's wife was obviously under great pressure. But she was so nice that we all pitched in to help her.

LOW: I had very little experience with excess demands — just enough to know what it could be.

We came back to this country for four and a half years. Then we were off to Brasilia in its early red-dust days. While the President was there and the Congress and the Supreme Court, the whole apparatus of government was still in Rio.

Q: Which one of the generals was president at that time?

LOW: General Costa e Silva at first, then General Medici. The Foreign Minister and the diplomatic corps were still in Rio. Only five or six countries besides the U.S. — the Portuguese, British, French, West Germans, and the Yugoslavs — were represented in Brasilia and then by only one or two officers. The U.S. had four or five officers plus supporting staff. There were no American businessmen, not a single one until just before we left when an electronics repair person arrived! The only non-official Americans were missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics based in Brasilia but living with the Indian tribes and translating the Bible into their language. They were an interesting group of people from whom we learned a great deal. We spent five days with one family on a fluvial island in the Amazon where they had been living and working with the Cataja for thirteen years, a fascinating glimpse into a very different world. Coming from Oklahoma as I do, it was interesting — and discouraging — to see the way in which the Brazilians were relating to their Indians, facing the same intractable problems and dilemmas that we had. There don't seem to be any good answers.

Shortly after we arrived in Brazil, our Ambassador, Burke Elbrick, was kidnaped by terrorists but released, apparently unharmed a few days later. Steve was Principal Officer in Brasilia. During the lengthy interval before a new ambassador (William Rountree, the first one to be resident in Brasilia) was appointed, Steve was the target of continuing and strident threats. Four guards with machine guns accompanied him everywhere; the house was guarded, and a menacing but unintelligent German shepherd police dog was installed in the garden. We adapted to the changes this required but it kept us constantly alert to the danger.

In those years Brasilia was a wonderful place to live as a diplomat. With no diplomatic community of any size and with a very small American community, we were completely immersed in Brazilian society. It was a marvelous experience and we have warm memories of our time there.

Q: You were very fortunate because it isn't that way now.

LOW: I'm sure it has changed a great deal. We traveled a fair amount through the hinterland as well as to better known places on the coast.

Q: Your boys must have been a nice outdoor age.

LOW: They were. On the rare occasions when we tried to bottle them up in an apartment in Rio for a week, both they and I were climbing the walls. We hadn't developed the technique for living in a densely packed city. We did have a wonderful time on our family excursions. We visited ranches and mineral sites, dusty old towns and bustling new ones. Mary Martin and her husband Richard Holliday had a fazenda tucked away in a remote spot where they welcomed us whenever we came that way; in the dingy town nearby we visited the little boutique Richard had designed for the handicrafts they sought out during their travels around the country. I shall remember Mary doffing her Civil War cap and dancing in to greet us in one of the rooms of their house that Richard had designed so skillfully as a series of stage settings.

We did a lot of entertaining in Brasilia, sometimes at our small house (I had to move all the furniture each time we had a sit-down dinner for eighteen) with its large yard that slowly grew into a garden — a fine place for a feijoada gathering on a leisurely Saturday afternoon.

Q: Was that on the south side of the lake?

LOW: Yes.

Q: Because that, of course, has become the dividing point between living accommodations in Brasilia now, and there's no solution for it because there are apartments on one side of the lake and houses on the other side.

LOW: At the time we were there, the only housing available for embassy people, with that one exception, was an apartment building in bloco 113. That was not a very satisfactory arrangement but there was no alternative.

At that time there was a stream of important American visitors wanting to see Brasilia, many who wanted to pay their respects to the President. So we found ourselves in this little house with AID furniture, using our own china and silver. But happily the Brazilians are informal people and we did not feel uncomfortable entertaining the Chief Justice or the ranking admiral under these conditions. Large receptions were held at the embassy in the lovely garden courtyard designed by Burle Marx.

Q: Is it the same Embassy we have now?

LOW: No. That building is now a small annex of the new one.

Q: So the annex was the Embassy when you were there?

LOW: Yes. It included a small apartment for the Ambassador to use when he came up from Rio. So his base point was right in the embassy building itself until a residence was ready for him shortly after we left.

We frequently entertained large numbers of people at buffet suppers in that courtyard setting. I recall being absolutely exhausted by the process. Just getting together the serving dishes was a project since the embassy didn't have many; we had to use our own and sometimes borrow from other embassy members.

This was from mid-1968 until the end of 1971 — before the Directive on Wives in 1972. Many of the U.S. Embassy wives in Brasilia at that time were foreign born, most of Latin American origin. Some had grown up with a different pattern of participating in community activities. I felt strongly that no one should be pressured into taking part, much less could be required to do so. When a request was made of the American community, I would invite people to come to discuss it if they were interested; we would talk it over to decide what we could handle and then everyone was warmly invited to participate. But whether they did or not was entirely their decision. Very often in Brasilia a number declined.

In this connection I vividly remember an admiral from UNITAS who wanted us to offer a reception for 150 guests. Since we lacked the capability and Brasilia at that time had no catering services, this hardly seemed possible. But we did it and lived to tell the tale. This episode is part of the background of my feeling that if spouses are needed to perform such functions, not only should they be compensated adequately but those who are interested in developing the special skills required should be offered some training. I love to cook, and cooking a dinner for ten people is one thing. But planning and producing a buffet dinner for 150 is another order of magnitude! It seems to have been assumed — by people who had no idea what they were asking — that requests for such efforts were reasonable and the projects manageable. And often that just wasn't so. Now expectations have changed and so has people's performance. I gather that more and more entertaining is being done at restaurants — or not at all.

Q: Or not at all, which is unfortunate, I think. And, of course, with the restaurant entertaining your representation allowance is just siphoned off.

LOW: It doesn't go very far at best. Even doing things on a shoestring, as we did, and doing it ourselves, one couldn't stretch the allowance to cover the needed representation.

I wanted to make one other point in terms of taking part in Brazilian community events. In June every year the Brasilia community put on a big fair in which all countries represented

in Brazil were expected to participate, not just the ones resident in Brasilia although we clearly were more visible.

Q: Was that the International Bazaar or whatever it was called?

LOW: It was called the Festa dos Estados. Their notion of what the Americans should do included baking dozens and dozens of chocolate cakes. That is all very well except that there weren't enough of us to supply the demand, complicated by the fact that some of us were Latin and had no experience with chocolate cake making. My most difficult project in persuasion was the annual effort to enlist people to bake cakes. We ordered cases of mix and hoped that people would offer to take part. One year we even ordered teflon-lined pans to facilitate the process. As I recall, the number of cakes always fell woefully short of the demand so we resorted to selling them by the slice. To this day I can hardly look at that kind of chocolate cake in tube-pan shape without feeling weary.

In volunteer terms, perhaps my most significant project was serving on the school board. When we arrived, the American School consisted of eight grades. It had a number of Brazilian children and those of other nationalities because it was the only non-Portuguese speaking school in Brasilia. About a year before we left, the Brazilians announced that on their 150th anniversary in March 1972, all ambassadors would be required to be resident in Brasilia or would lose their diplomatic status and immunities.

Q: That was a way to get them up there.

LOW: And we found ourselves needing to produce an instant high school to be ready for that situation. This involved architectural plans and seeing that the building was constructed, decisions about the number and equipment of science labs, choices of textbooks, working out admission policy for non-Americans. As president of the school board at that juncture, I found it a very challenging task.

Another rewarding project developed because the wife of one of the Brazilian cabinet ministers was interested in improving her English. So we established a discussion group that included a number of Brazilians plus several native English speakers. We met regularly and took up a wide range of subjects, someone being responsible each time for preparing a paper. This gave us new insights into Brazilian perspectives.

One topic that made a great impression on me concerned Macumba, a widely practiced cult based in large part on the Yoruba religion which had come from Africa several centuries earlier. (It was fascinating many years later when we lived in Nigeria to see it in operation now. The Brazilian version has a Rip van Winkle quality.)

Q: It's interesting the way your involvement ... how it grew, how it took on new dimensions as your children got older and you had more free time.

LOW: The largest element of difference was having left over energy!

At the end of 1971, just in time for Christmas, we came back to the U.S. for four and a half years. For part of that interval I worked at the Overseas Development Council on a wide range of projects. The ODC is concerned with third world development, putting economic and social problems in focus for discussion with U.S. policy makers and the public. I wrote a brochure on the Panama Canal Treaty when that was under discussion, an article for Current History on energy perspectives of the non-oil-producing countries in 1975, trade policy when Congress wrote a new law in that field. With a background in economics and international affairs, I was involved with the problem of the increasing external debt of developing countries. This was the period, 1974-76, of the first oil crisis. North-South tensions in the General Assembly were acute. A conference to discuss basic issues was convened in Paris. UNCTAD members were pressing for setting up a Common Fund for raw materials. Little did I know how relevant all these matters would be at our next post!

In August 1976 we found ourselves in Zambia, arriving just in time to prepare for a visit from Secretary Kissinger. The Rhodesian problem on Zambia's border had reached crisis proportions. Steve soon found himself wearing two hats, that of American ambassador to Zambia and that of American participant in eight successive British missions which sought to resolve the situation in Rhodesia. The latter entailed incessant travel — he logged over half a million miles on that venture. Life in Lusaka was eventful, too, with curfews imposed when air strikes were expected and consternation when Joshua Nkomo's house (one of the two leaders of the Zimbabwe Patriotic Front) was bombed — just a block from our residence.

There was a certain amount of normal entertaining but the focus was on the many work sessions, often involving high ranking U.S. officials, both on the Rhodesian question and on Namibia where discussions were going on within the framework of the UN Security Council. While the residence was not large, it functioned very well as a site for these meetings. Again, I found myself without a cook much of the time. I tried to train people but we sort of limped along as best we could. The culinary situation was further complicated by the fact that provisions were hard to come by.

With Steve traveling outside the country a great deal, we did not have the normal opportunity to get acquainted with the community and to travel within the country. Again in Lusaka the American community consisted largely of missionaries. They were the backbone of the American Women's Club and a wonderful group of people.

When we arrived there had been almost a complete turnover of personnel at the embassy. One of the first things we did was to put together a seminar on Zambian life, covering as many facets as we could enlist knowledgeable lecturers. With them we explored the sociology, the various tribal groups, cultural differences, religious perspectives. This stood all of us in good stead as we moved into the new situation.

Q: That was quite different from Uganda?

LOW: Oh, very different. But it was more like Uganda than like Senegal in that it had been a British area and had experienced less than a century of outside influence. Tribal factors were still a central element. One major difference, however, had been the existence of a white settler community.

To shift gears. Some members of the white Zambian community had formed a Wine and Food Society of about 25 couples. Our previous ambassador had promised that we would put on a Thanksgiving dinner for them; she left one middle-sized turkey and a case of California wine for that purpose. Shortly after we arrived, the governing board of this group asked me to meet with them to discuss the planning of the event. “What will your first course be?” was the first question. “Thanksgiving dinner doesn't have a first course. You start with turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce and finish with pumpkin pie.” This didn't fit their notion of an epicurean meal and they were not pleased. Finally they pushed to the point where I simply said, “I'm sorry but I just can't do this. My cook is seriously ill; I don't have anyone in the kitchen to help me. There's no way I can do it.” And they said, “There are other wives at the embassy. You can have them do it.” That, of course, was that last straw. I explained emphatically that this was not the way things were done at the American embassy! And there the matter rested for several months. Then it occurred to us, since we were all new and wanting to meet people, that we could show off the California wine, as its producers had hoped we would, at a cocktail party with California appetizers. While food supplies were scarce, luscious avocados were in season, some tropical fruit — and one middle-sized turkey. We talked it over, all were enthusiastic, and each decided what dishes to make. It was a festive project. (I should add that of all our posts, this was the most rewarding group of wives. We thoroughly enjoyed each other's company and joined together smoothly for whatever project we decided to undertake.) The plan was to give everyone name tags, guests and hostesses as well, so we could maximize the opportunity to make contacts. But the Wine and Food Society didn't like the idea that so many Americans were to be included. They wanted it to be exclusive. When it became

clear that if they were going to have their party, it would be on these terms, they reluctantly agreed — and in the end everyone enjoyed the occasion.

Q: Then you went from there to ...

LOW: I should say something more before that. Zambia is the only post where I was able to work professionally in our mission. Events in the North-South dialogue were moving rapidly when we arrived — the Paris talks, the UNCTAD effort to set up a Common Fund. Zambia, as a major copper exporter, was involved in all these initiatives.

Q: What does that stand for?

LOW: The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Our embassy was small and, with all the political and economic developments, everyone was working full tilt. Since the Economic Officer had his hands more than full and since I had been following these events closely in Washington, I was hired on contract for a year to cover developments and to undertake the annual Department of Commerce economic survey of the country. This was a satisfying experience, not only because of using my professional skills but also because it gave me a much better idea of the way the embassy functioned. This experience contributed to my growing awareness of the importance of using spouse skills in our missions. It can be of value to the mission's effort and is so much healthier for the individuals. That is a whole subject in itself — the need for a framework within which spouses can use professional skills — the Foreign Service Associates program.

From Zambia we went on to Nigeria in October 1979, an exhilarating moment in their history. The military had just handed power back to the civilians after a series of municipal, state and federal elections and had changed the constitution to function as a congressional rather than a parliamentary form of government. There were now 19 instead of 12 states and Steve visited all of them during our tour to get a comprehensive view of

that complex country. We found ourselves in some improbable places since some of the new capitals literally had no provision as yet to house a non-resident.

We had been in Lagos for only three weeks when a group from the House Armed Forces Committee came through. Knowing that the Nigerian legislators were interested in talking about how their new legislative system might function, Steve quickly put together an opportunity for them to talk with our Congressmen and staff. This entailed a sit-down dinner for over 100 people in our garden. At that point I hadn't even had a chance to go through the inventory to see how many forks we had and what sort of menu we could handle. Happily there was a cook with whom I was just learning to work; he hadn't had much supervision in the prior period and was quite nervous about the situation. It all worked out in the end despite some confusion in the kitchen. The episode pointed out again, though, the discrepancy between the value of such events to our mission effort and the blithe reliance on volunteers to carry out the mechanics of the affair. It is well beyond the realm of volunteer capability.

In the same vein, Vice President Mondale visited Lagos in the summer of 1980. We put on a sit-down dinner for him at the time of year when you can't be sure about the weather. So it had to be inside. We used every square inch of space, carefully calculated and arranged, to be able to seat a maximum of 64 people, then the advance team arrived and said we must find space for another five. I don't know what you do in a case like that. We decided that some people would have just a plate and would stand, squeezed against a wall somewhere. This again was an important event in the functioning of the mission. I did have a staff, the necessary cutlery and utensils, but it still called for more organization and expertise than one can expect to have provided on a volunteer basis. The Department needs to seek out the spouses who have this interest and provide them with training for such undertakings.

Q: But you know everyone has done that on a volunteer basis.

LOW: But we are living in a different era from the pre-1972 period and the Department of State has not accepted the consequences. It is time to professionalize the catering side of our activities. It seems to me that given the central importance of entertaining to the ability of the Foreign Service to do its job, the Department should be more realistic about what is entailed. The value of entertaining lies in providing occasions for meaningful contact with people in the host country. The mission should be empowered to decide the level of entertaining for the next period and to cover fully the costs of providing it. This means covering not just the raw ingredients but also of the spouse time required to plan, manage and execute the affair. Funds should be available for all functions that the mission sponsors whether given by the most junior or most senior officer. If the spouse of that person chooses to do the work, wonderful! That's the easiest solution. She is then paid for the time and effort she has put into it. But if there isn't a spouse, or if she is sick or uninterested or away from post, the funds are there for that function to be serviced. For more senior spouses this would mean that they can avoid the hassle of these chores if they choose; the funds would be there for someone else to undertake the job. This would then free them to accept gracefully their proper “representational” role — of being at the airport at 6:00 in the morning to meet the president and his wife when they return. Or to go to the various national days. Or to function in all the capacities that other countries still consider the role of the wife of the ambassador.

Q: ...a good replacement?

LOW: Yes. That seems to be where things stand. The opinion we have heard repeatedly from the Hill is that until the wife of the President is paid a salary or given some sort of compensation for her representational activities, there is no way in which funds will be provided to pay our ambassador's wives.

Q: We should be talking to Mrs. Gephardt, Mrs. Simon and others.

LOW: On the score of providing funds for the time and effort involved in entertaining, when I made this point to people in the Department, they simply looked me straight in the eye and said, “We can't afford it.”

Q: Well, it's too bad really because that's one place where they don't need an act of Congress to increase the representation to cover some of these expenses. And that's one place we should be focusing on.

LOW: But at the present moment, of course, we do have an act of Congress. Graham-Rudman is shrinking the Department resources to the extent that they can't consider such “frills” when they are forced to cut staff.

Q: And I'm not sure it's going to get any better because with our tremendous national debt and trade deficit and what have you, it must seem absolutely frivolous to many, many Congressmen.

LOW: But back to Nigeria. In many ways Lagos was the most difficult place I've served. Partly, perhaps, because the consequence of wives being cut off from the real life of the mission hadn't had time to work itself out. Whether that was it or not I found myself feeling very much like a fifth wheel. So recognizing that doors are open to an ambassador's wife that may not be open to other people, I decided to pick areas of interest to me and to invite other mission spouses to come with me through those doors. This seemed the best role I could play.

So I asked them, “Would you like to have a tea at the residence? We can use the Art in Embassy paintings as the peg to hang it on. We'll each invite someone we know in the Nigerian community, or more if you like.

I will invite a few others, and we'll all have a chance to meet new people.” We did that and it seemed worthwhile. The other major component of that picture, a very important one, was the group of American women married to Nigerians. They were pleased to be involved

in such events and to be reassured that the American community had not forgotten them. They appreciated being welcomed to the residence as hostesses as well, since they were often the ones that brought Nigerian women for us to meet.

The other major project in which I got involved in Nigeria was putting together a group to study Nigerian literature. That's how it started at least. The members were half Nigerian and half non-Nigerian with participation from several embassies. We made an effort to keep the Nigerian component balanced within its ethnic division — Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa/ Fulani. These sessions proved to be absolutely fascinating. Partly they were occasions when people felt that they began to know each other more than superficially. For the Nigerians those afternoons were an opportunity to compare their diverse cultures — and we non-Nigerians would listen entranced at the worlds they opened up. The group somehow answered a need and grew to the point where it had to split like an amoeba. Shortly after we left, there were five groups. The number has decreased since but I'm told that now, ten years later, more than one group is still going full tilt.

Q: When was the Biafra war?

LOW: Long before we were there. In 1967-69. We were there from 1979 to 1981.

Q: So enough time that some of the wounds have healed between the tribes, or had it?

LOW: I think the Nigerians had all recognized that in their common interest they must learn to live together — and to go on from there. Yes, there were still very sore points and I think the Ibo were seared by the whole experience. But they all rallied to putting things back together. That was the overriding mood.

So that is where Stevens career has taken us. It has been fascinating and frustrating — and a rewarding use of those years.

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse's name: Stephen Low

Date entered Service: January 1956Left Service: April 1987

Posts: 1957-59Kampala, Uganda 1960-63Dakar, Senegal 1968-71Brasilia, Brazil 1976-79Lusaka, Zambia 1979-81Lagos, Nigeria

Status: Spouse of FSO (ambassador)

Date and place of birth: Tulsa, Oklahoma; 1926

Maiden Name: Carpenter

Parents: J. Rodman Carpenter

Schools:Denison University, BA 1948; Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, MA 1949; Oxford University, BA, MA, 1951; Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, completion of comprehensive exams for PhD, 1952

Date and place of marriage: Findley, Ohio; 1954

Children: Three

Positions held in Washington and at post:At Post: Brazil - President School Board; organized Brazilian-American discussion group. Zambia - President American Women's Club, organized seminar on Zambian life for American women. Worked on contract on Zambian economic affairs; Nigeria - Honorary president American Women's Club, organized Nigerian/Third World Country study group in Nigerian literature.

Washington, DC: AAFSW activities - 1982-84, Forum Chairman, worked on developing Foreign Born Spouse group and teenage group AWAL; also worked with divorced FS

spouses to prepare legislation; chaired group which researched and wrote FS Families in Situations of International Crisis to present to Secretary of State; worked with education group to survey and report on Educational Realities for FS families; worked on survey of attitude toward FS of all FS spouses; 1984-86, Developed Foreign Service Associate proposal and led group which achieved legislation to require design of pilot project to institute direct communication with spouses.

Honors: Phi Beta Kappa, BA with honors; Fulbright scholarship to Oxford and Soroptimist

End of interview